



## *Schools find ‘new normal’ as students return*

Learning has always been a journey that students and teachers undertake together, with help from families at home and administrators and support staff at school. From March 2020 to August 2021, that journey was drastically altered by COVID-19, with viewing on a computer screen taking the place of face-to-face contact, and hands-on experience largely replaced by typing on a keyboard.

As this school year began, with students fully back in District 68 school buildings for the first time in a year-and-a-half, the journey changed once again. School officials say students, families and staff have welcomed the return to in-person learning, but the experience has had its share of complications.

Students can now be in the same room, but generally must maintain three feet of separation indoors. That affects behavior throughout the school day.

Take arrival, for example. At Highland Elementary School, students who come by bus line up by classroom on the playground, where their teachers greet them before they enter the building group by group. Those students who walk to school, or who are dropped off by parents (a somewhat



*Art students at Old Orchard Junior High wear masks and spread out in class.*

larger number than in the past due to concerns about students riding the buses together), join in the lines before entry.

On a recent morning, Principal Karen Bradley greeted students by name as she watched them find their groups. “I can see your pretty little nose,” she commented to one girl, gently reminding her to pull up her mask.

Mask-wearing — another critical safety practice — has become standard for all students and staff. Teachers are vigilant about the practice, which has its drawbacks. “The process makes teaching difficult in that they have to adjust their proximity to students, they have to focus efforts on greater articulation behind the mask,” said Devonshire Principal Daniel Schuth. “They don’t get to see the student reactions that are so important to gathering evidence of student understanding and so have adjusted to different

techniques to gather that information.” Some teachers even use microphones to make themselves understood.

Students are allowed occasional “mask breaks,” during which they can go outside for a few minutes and take their masks off. At Old Orchard Junior High, Principal Greg Hanson said, “I think teachers have kind of used that time as a release valve, and also as a motivator. They are realizing that to have that period where kids can have a ‘brain break,’ a little social time, has lasting value.”

Although it has been decades since classrooms had neat rows of desks bolted to the floor, safety concerns have brought back reminders of the past. Desks are movable and, before the pandemic, were rearranged as needed to allow students to work in small groups. Now, desks must be separated and rows maintained.

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At Highland School, lunch tables are individual and separate (above). Digital cameras on mobile stands (at right) help connect with quarantined students.



## Return

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“It’s impossible to have a classroom of 27 kids and not have it look like an old-time classroom,” Hanson said. Bradley noted, “The biggest challenge to learning is the difficulties with less group work due to needing to distance.”

In every school, there are multiple visible reminders of the changes wrought by the pandemic. Signs encouraging safe practices are everywhere, and floors have markers to encourage social distancing. At the junior high, where students move from room to room throughout the day, hallways have dividers to keep students moving in an orderly fashion, rather than clustering together. Teachers and other staff are on hand to reinforce the need

to keep masks up and stay apart.

The changes are especially notable with respect to most students’ favorite period — lunch. Students don’t sit in groups, but at single tables. Prepared lunches are individually packaged and put out for students to pick up. Schools have had to add lunch periods, expand lunch spaces, or both, to maintain separation. Bradley noted that, because students eat alone, they tend to get through lunch more quickly, leaving more time for them to be outside.

The district now participates in the SHIELD Illinois testing program, which allows officials to monitor COVID infection and spread. Students whose families agree undergo the test weekly at school. Students who test positive are quarantined until they test negative on days 1, 3, 5 and 7 after exposure. Students who were found to be closely in contact with someone who tested positive, and whose families did not agree to the SHIELD testing, must also quarantine.

The number of students required to quarantine has been low, but the district still must accommodate them during their time away from school. At the beginning of the year, teachers sent work home, but they are now connected to class remotely, using digital cameras that allow teachers to address them and display presentations at the same time they are presented to students in class.

School officials acknowledge that the entire pandemic period has been hard for students and staff alike, and students have had to adjust once again to their return, just as they had to adjust to learning from home. At the junior high, Hanson has noticed more “low-level conflicts and negative interactions between students,” which he attributes largely to reacclimation to school. Teachers have had to work hard to keep students engaged, using techniques such as learning-focused games, apps and small rewards. “I don’t think kids don’t want to learn, they’re just not back in the routine of what learning looks and feels like in a full school day,” he said.

Principals and teachers have communicated with families in a variety of ways — a critical aspect of their work given that directives from federal and state officials have changed, and are expected to keep changing, over the course of the year. Bradley and Schuth have used newsletters, and Schuth cited online applications such as Seesaw, as well as phone calls. Hanson said he started the year using short videos to communicate safety protocols and basic academic information, and still sends weekly emails. “The communica-

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Board of Education meetings are held at 7 p.m. on the third Thursday of each month. All are invited to attend.

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# District reaches out to support families

**D**iana Juarez, District 68's Coordinator of Family Services and Engagement, has worked to provide information and support to district families as they endure the continuing fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic.

That work has ranged from getting basic information translated into families' native languages, to helping families learn about community partners, to assisting with distribution of financial help and supplies to those in need.

"There are always communication challenges when you have as diverse a community as we have in Skokie and in District 68, and this means we have to work to make sure all families are able to access information and reach out with questions," Juarez said. With that in mind, she added, "the district's IT department created a portal where administrators can add content to be translated into more than 100 languages, and so every email has the capacity to be translated by the readers into any of those languages." Her own emails have been translated more than 400 times through the portal. For families who need more intensive translation help, Juarez works with the Nilens Township ELL Parent Center to use interpreters trained by the center.

Having families as informed as possible allows teachers and administrators to help their students get back into the routine of learning after a year-and-a-half of disruption. As Greg Hanson, principal of Old Orchard Junior High, noted, "In my mind partnerships have been and are going to be key to the success of this school year. Productive partnerships between parents, teachers, students, administration, and staff are going to be essential."

In that spirit of partnership, Juarez has been working with district social workers and psychologists to find out what supports those professionals think students and their fami-

lies need. That has led to presentations for parents focusing on issues such as mental health and curriculum.

One such presentation, "Caring for Families in the New Normal," is a collaboration between the district, Apna Ghar (a Chicago-based human rights organization) and Turning Point (a Skokie-based mental health services provider). Juarez said the district plans to offer the presentation in Spanish and Urdu, two of the district's most common languages, in coming weeks.

Following up on that collaboration, the district recently received a grant from the Skokie Community Foundation to support a partnership with Turning Point. "The program will consist of a short series of sessions with Turning Point therapists, using conversation and other creative avenues of expression and providing a safe space for youth to talk about trauma, with specific focus on the extraordinary trauma coming out of the past year," Juarez said.

Helping families who need emergency funding, counseling or help with their children's studies is an important part of Juarez's job. "Skokie has many organizations working hard and providing assistance to families, but it can be challenging to know what, where, and how to access the help," she said. "I have been able to distribute \$10,000 in grants and supplies to families in our district through these connections, and am working to continue securing more."

The district tapped Juarez for this role in fall 2019, shortly before the pandemic began. She finds the work rewarding. "I do not have all the answers, but I am here to help because their district values families and their needs and has tasked me with helping find the answers they are looking for. Parents can feel this, and I hope they continue to reach out to me with any concerns."

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tions took up a lot of time and mental energy but I heard from many families that the communication was much appreciated," he said.

The next big change has come in the form of vaccinations recently approved for children ages 5-11. District officials worked with the Skokie Health Department and other health providers to offer the vaccines at all schools before the Thanksgiving holiday. The shots were

not mandatory for students (as they are for staff), but administrators said on the district web site that widespread acceptance "will be crucial in ending the mitigation requirements and recommendations in public schools."

Overall, the principals have been pleased with the cooperation of students, families and staff, finding little or no resistance to the practices that the pandemic has made necessary. "We are grateful for all of the support and understanding from parents," Bradley said. "Most people know the importance and gravity of the mo-

ment," Schuth said. "Their patience and graciousness have been humbling."

All agree that the school community needs to maintain that support. "The teachers, administrators, and staff at OOJH have invested so much mental and emotional energy into getting this year off the ground in a successful way," Hanson said. "Now more than ever teachers need to know the adults at home and in the community support them and are looking out for them. I would like the community to know the teachers are looking out for and supporting their children."

## HIGHLIGHTS

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## Letter from the Superintendent

Dear School District 68  
Community,

As of this writing the weather is getting colder, and COVID-19 infection rates are on the rise again. I recently read an article about what the next phase of our COVID experience might look like. The article outlined the three most important factors that will shape the coming months: COVID variants, vaccinations, and you.

The first of those factors is relatively straightforward. Infection rates will be impacted by any new strains (Omicron being the latest) that emerge. If a new strain does develop that could be spread more easily or have more significant health outcomes for patients, the next months will reflect that. This one is largely outside of our control. However, the next two factors are firmly within our control.

Now that vaccinations are widely available for anyone aged 5 and older, we have a significant tool that can save lives and help get schooling — as well as everything else — headed back toward normal. Skokie School District 68 employed that tool during the week of November 15. We hosted free vaccination clinics with the Illinois Department of Public Health and local health care providers at each one of our schools during the school day, and also

offered a Saturday clinic for those unable to attend one during the week. In addition to the new layer of safety that providing vaccinations for our 5- to 11-year-old students offers, we have made booster shots available to all staff members.

While I understand that some are hesitant to get vaccinated, a high rate of vaccinations will reduce the spread of COVID and therefore improve our ability to relax mitigation efforts and return to more normal times. I implore you all to reflect on that, especially as the next variant is poised to spread as the Delta one did.

The third factor that will impact our experience over the next months is you, me, and we. As much as we are all ready for the pandemic to be over, it is imperative that we continue using the care and cautions that we have had to learn until the impact of COVID-19 is minimized. To that end, District 68 will continue its mitigation efforts in service to our families, our staff, and the greater community. Rest assured that we, too, can't wait to put this behind us so we can redouble our efforts to provide the best education possible to our students!

Finally, as we approach winter break, I want to wish you the best for your time with your family and friends, as well as a great start to the new year.

Sincerely,  
James E. Garwood, Ed.D.  
Superintendent of Schools

**Our mission is to develop children who are confident and creative learners. We provide a rigorous curriculum and a supportive school environment that promotes high achievement, encourages personal growth, and meets the unique needs of each child.**